

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF BOXING: WOMEN ATHLETES' PERCEPTION AND CAREER

DIMENSÕES SOCIOCULTURAIS DO BOXE: PERCEPÇÃO E TRAJETÓRIA DE MULHERES ATLETAS

DIMENSIONES SOCIO-CULTURALES DE BOXEO: PERCEPCIÓN Y CARRERA DE ATLETAS MUJERES

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Keywords

Women.
Athletes.
Boxing.

Abstract: This study aimed at examining the history and perception of female boxing athletes about their sporting careers regarding sociocultural dimensions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Brazilian professional female boxers. Methodologically, the study combined the software *Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte* (ALCESTE) and Content Analysis. After thematic class-based analysis, we discussed the view that female boxing capitalizes few financial incentives and little publicity. We also found that, throughout their history, respondents have faced difficulties in terms of family support and prejudices.

Palavras-chave

Mulheres.
Atletas.
Boxe.

Resumo: O objetivo deste trabalho foi analisar a trajetória e percepção de atletas do boxe feminino sobre o esporte escolhido como profissão quanto a dimensões socioculturais. Para tanto, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com sete boxeadoras profissionais do Brasil. Metodologicamente, combinou-se o programa ALCESTE (*Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte*) e a Análise de Conteúdo. A partir da análise em classes temáticas, discutiu-se o relato de que o boxe feminino capitaliza poucos incentivos financeiros e pouca divulgação. Constatou-se também que, ao longo de sua trajetória, as entrevistadas se depararam com dificuldades quanto ao apoio da família e preconceitos.

Palabras clave

Mujeres.
Atletas.
Boxeo.

Resumen: El objetivo de este trabajo fue analizar la trayectoria y percepción de atletas del boxeo femenino sobre el deporte escogido como profesión en cuanto a sus dimensiones socioculturales. Para ello, se realizaron entrevistas semiestruturadas con siete boxeadoras profesionales brasileñas. Metodológicamente, se combina el software ALCESTE (*Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte*) y el Análisis de Contenido. A partir del análisis en clases temáticas, se discutió el relato de que el boxeo femenino capitaliza pocos incentivos financieros y tiene poca divulgación. También se constató que, a lo largo de su trayectoria, las entrevistadas se han enfrentado a dificultades en lo que se refiere al apoyo familiar y a los prejuicios.

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Received on: April 11, 2014
Approved on: January 21, 2015



1 INTRODUCTION

While growing social changes are modifying old concepts with gender views, prejudice and discrimination persist toward women's participation in several spheres of society, including sports. Such prejudices and discrimination in sports become even more evident when women engage in male-dominated sports such as boxing (OLIVEIRA, CHEREM, TUBINO, 2008).

The female-male binomial has guided sporting competitions in general as well as Olympic sports since the beginning of systematization of modern sport. There are Olympic sports played by men only (such as decathlon) and there exclusively female ones, for instance, rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming.

Women's participation in sports has been historically lower than men's, both as athletes and as coaches or managers. Even in women's teams or competitions, males are hegemonic in most authority positions (GOMES, 2008).

Men are still predominant in modern Olympic Games. The event itself was planned and designed by French baron Pierre de Coubertin, who personally discouraged the practice of competitive sporting activities by women since he believed sport to be a means to celebrate and promote male virtues (ROMARIZ; DEVIDE; VOTRE, 2007).

Despite opposition by the creator of the modern Olympics, some sports that include women's participation were added to the Olympic competition program since its inception, such as gymnastics (only as demonstration in its first editions). That happened, at first, because international federations and subsequently the organizing committees of the host cities were in charge of choosing the Olympic program of events and thereby used their relative autonomy to include women only in some sports (MacALOON, 1984).

It should be emphasized that, throughout history, the criteria for inclusion of sports in the Olympic program have become increasingly flexible and more attentive to gender, following changes in modern society in general, with women gaining several rights throughout the twentieth century. This process has gradually led to the current situation in which women are represented/participate in all Olympic sports (COMITÉ OLÍMPICO INTERNACIONAL, 2013).

Boxing became an Olympic sport for men in 1904.¹ More than a hundred years later, the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee considered including women's boxing in the 2008 programming. However, it was only an August 13, 2009 meeting that decided to include it in three categories in the 2012 Olympic Games (COI..., 2009). Three Brazilian athletes took part in the women's boxing debut at the London Olympics, and one of them won a bronze medal.²

Academic literature includes few publications on boxing in Portuguese. Some works have reports on rules, standards, technique teaching, compilation of results and short accounts on boxers' lives. Studies on women's participation in boxing are rare in Brazil and most focus on the existence of prejudice in this sport (FERRETTI; KNIJNIK, 2007).

International academic production, in turn, has pointed out that women's boxing was

1 There was only one interruption in the presence of this sport at the Olympics. It was in Stockholm in 1912, since Sweden, the host country, used to ban boxing by law for considering it a violent and rudimentary practice. see: < <http://www.olympic.org/ioc> >.

2 Adriana Araújo, Erica Matos and Roseli Feitosa are Brazilian athletes who participated in the debut of women's boxing in the 2012 Olympic Games. Adriana Araújo won a bronze medal.

overlooked in studies on that sport until the 1990s in Europe and the United States, as shown by Halbert (1997). Only from the 2000s on international literature on women's boxing has grown, as evidenced by Boyle, Millington and Vertinsky (2006).

Identifying that gap led to the production of this research, especially from a perspective that does not emphasize technical elements, anthropometric data, rules and/or result reports. It aims to analyze the history of Brazilian female athletes and their perceptions about the sport they practice professionally, according to socio-cultural dimensions, namely: personal histories, relationship with family and friends, sponsors and other social relations. Thus, the question guiding this work was: what are the perceptions of Brazilian female athletes in Olympic boxing about the sport they practice professionally?

We understand that the prejudices and stereotypes rooted in contemporary societies about boxing (in general) and women's participation (in particular) can be overcome as the reality of these athletes is more deeply known according to their own narratives.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In this study, the methodological approach involves a quantitative and qualitative process. According to Neves (1996, p. 2), “[...] quantitative and qualitative methods are not mutually exclusive. While they differ in form and emphasis, they contribute to research work with rational and intuitive procedures [...]”. Throughout this topic, we intend to show the process.

The study was carried out with randomly selected female professional athletes in Olympic boxing in Brazil. Thus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven athletes.

The interviews took place in 2011, in January in Salvador, Bahia, in February in São Paulo, and in March in Brasília. However, it is worth noting that the interviews were previously applied as a test pilot with boxing athletes during the 7th Brazilian Female Boxing Championship – July 25-August 1, 2010, in Aracaju, Sergipe – and during the 7th Continental Female Olympic Boxing Championship – August 6-10, 2010, in Brasília, Federal District. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Brasília, registered under no. 304/2010, as it met the basic requirements of CNS Resolution 196/96 in force at the time.

After interviews were transcribed, the software *Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte* (ALCESTE) was used for processing quantitative information, combined with the Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin (2008), aimed at categorization and thematic analysis of athletes' speeches.

ALCESTE, developed by Max Reinert in 1990, is a textual data analysis software. “ALCESTE is a method of textual content analysis that performs a descending hierarchical classification in order to extract the different themes from a text, as well as sentences that characterize each theme” (CORDEIRO, 2007, p. 59).

In order to synthesize and categorize athletes' speeches, textual analysis was conducted on the semantics production of those speeches, observing the relationship between words, the frequency with which they appeared and their associations in classes, with the help of ALCESTE. Therefore, while the software allowed us to identify recurring themes from words in the interviews, establishing thematic categories for content analysis allowed us “[...] the inference of knowledge related to the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of those mes-

sages” (BARDIN, 2008, p. 42). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that while the process of analysis involves quantitative resources through statistical analysis by ALCESTE, the emphasis of the analysis was qualitative, since the phenomenon under study is full of subjectivity, significations and interpretive meanings.

ALCESTE produces a statistical analysis from a text file called Initial Context Unit (ICU) that, in the case of this study, corresponds to the interviews transcribed. Our analysis found two major axes including three classes (see Table 1 and Table 2), each representing an aspect of the content expressed by the athletes.³

The first axis, “Incentive for men and women athletes”, was made up of classes 1 and 2, called “Incentive” (Class 1) and “Sex and gender differences” (class 2). This axis shows the differences in incentives given to women and men athletes. The significant frequency of the words “*bolsa*”, (grant) “*apoio*” (support), “*ajuda*” (aid) and “*falta*” (lack) (Table 1) shows the athletes’ perceptions about the lack of incentive they receive in boxing. Table 2, composed of the words “*homens*” (men), “*rapaz*” (young man), “*mulher*” (woman), “*competição*” (competition) among others, makes up Class 2, “Gender differences”.

Table 1 - Axis 1 Vocabulary in Descending Hierarchical Analysis

Class 1	X ²	Words
Incentive	54,31	bols+
	48,52	apoi+
	34,57	ajud+
	30,31	falt+
	26,87	manter
	22,99	consequ+
	22,33	incentivo

Source: Research data

Table 2 - Axis 1 Vocabulary in Descending Hierarchical Analysis

Class 2	X ²	Words
Sex and gender differences	58,25	homens
	41,52	hom+
	31,61	antiga+
	29,70	competic+
	28,74	resultado
	21,50	coquilha
	23,04	público
	21,50	rapaz
	19,95	mulher

Source: Research data

The second axis, consisting of Class 3, involves individual’s history in boxing (see Table 3). It illustrates the history of athletes in sports, especially when they started in boxing, their perception of it, and what they intend to do in the future.

The significant frequency of verbs “*fala*” (speaks), “*comecei*” (I started), “*ficava*” (I used

³ The tables in this topic are illustrative of the systematization of the software for word identification. We chose to present the discussion of each of these axes as categories (as seen below) in which results of classical content analysis are presented.

to become”, “fiz” (I did it), “mudou” (it changed), and the word “academia” (gym) highlights athletes' accounts on their sporting careers. We analyzed athletes' histories by addressing issues such as participation in sports during childhood and adolescence; their reasons for practicing boxing; the positive and negative aspects of being a boxing athlete, as well as difficulties along that history.

Table 3 – Axis 2 vocabulary on Descending Hierarchical Analysis

Class 3	X ²	Words
History in boxing	16,58	fal+
	8,50	comec+
	8,02	fic+
	7,94	diss+
	7,93	faz
	7,45	mud+
	7,24	quer
	6,97	fiz
	6,61	academia

Source: Research data

In order to preserve the identity of athletes who participated in the investigation, information obtained was presented as A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 and A7.

3 INCENTIVE FOR MEN AND WOMEN ATHLETES

According to Hargreaves (2003), women's sports has been largely overlooked in analyzes of cultural history and sociology, becoming more politicized in the 1970s and 1980. According to the author, in the 1970s, participation of adolescents and women in athletics increased in many countries, modifying the scenario of world sports.

Coakley (1994) says that some factors have contributed to the increase in sports participation by girls and women in North America, such as: new opportunities for women's participation in public spaces; government legislation requiring equal treatment for women in public programs; recognition of the benefits of physical activity for health; strengthening the feminist movement; media coverage of women's participation in sports competitions, etc.

According to Simões, Conceição and Nery (2004), men resisted the inclusion of women in the sports scene for a long time, saying that sport could make them masculine, depriving them of their feminine qualities. This historical process had consequences to female participation in sports in general and this was reflected in the speeches of some athletes interviewed, even on the lack of incentive for boxing.

Incentive was indeed a recurring theme in athletes' speeches. As can be seen in their views on contemporary scenario for participation of women in boxing, respondents underscore the lack of incentives for that sport both in regard to issues related to sponsorship, money, help, support and in relation to prejudice.

In order to increase female participation, they should publicize it more. Sport has no support. The great problem of sport is that it has no support. (A2)

I think [there should be] more publicity because it is not publicized, we have no media on women's boxing. Everything is for other sports or for men's boxing; women's still has no support. We had the first world champion. Have you seen her around? Did anyone her about her? Does anyone know her? Nobody. That's a mistake...

People still discriminate against women's boxing. (A6)

There needs to be more publicity, more dissemination and more incentive, more schools, more colleges, and at gyms, right? (A7)

A lot of people think you are marginalized, homosexual... There are many taboos. (A3)

In their speeches, athletes pointed out the media's distinct treatment to women's boxing. In recent years, the Sports Incentive Law, the Ten Year Plan for Sport and Leisure, as well as support by state-owned and private companies have contributed to increase investment in high performance sport in Brazil. Note that, despite this, (men's and women's) boxing still lacks resources.

Information on specific financial investments in Brazilian boxing is not available in academic literature or public sources. This aspect restricts the analysis of the incentive to boxing, given the scope of this research. However, professional boxing athletes and coaches report insufficient investment, especially when they speak to the media. For example, when boxer "Esquiva Falcão" won silver medal at the 2012 Olympics, he celebrated, but his coach warned: "Boxing doesn't get the support it deserves in Brazil" (GAZETA, 2012). Thus, women's boxing seems to suffer the consequences of a broader context, as can be seen in the speeches of athletes A2 and A6.

3.1 Sex and gender

In discussing athletes' speeches on sex and gender, some conceptual notes are needed. This study corroborates Confortin (2003), who points out the social construction of gender, in other words, the production of feminine and masculine. Therefore, it is not something established at birth (sex), but a process that occurs throughout life and makes people become men and women in very different ways, according to their experiences, their historical moments and their culture.

However, according to Badinter (2005), by thinking biological difference as a criterion to classify human beings, we are limited to a binary view, a mere oppositional relation. Goellner *et al.* (2009), in turn, pointed out that the gender issue is not unique to women or men. These relationships are pervaded by contradictions and are constructed daily in experiences that demarcate different universes and perspectives on the world.

In the narratives of the athletes interviewed, sex and gender are directly related to sexuality. According to them, many people believe that they are lesbians for practicing boxing. Their speeches express and reflect cultural gender paradigms such as those addressed by Pires and Ferraz (2008), when they indicate that those are differences constructed during socialization processes that structure individuals' entire lives, materializing in their speeches and behavior as can be seen in the athletes' speeches.

I think it's because it is a sort of masculine sport, more for men, kind a 'tough', it has more contact. So I think women see it as [a place to] get hurt. (A1)

To do boxing you have to have... in other sports too, but particularly in boxing, the girl has to be very firm. Because she'll suffer prejudice, people think she's a lesbian. And if she's a lesbian there is no problem (laughs). There are straight girls and lesbians alike. (A2)

It is also a sport that everyone thinks it's for men. So there is some prejudice. I think there are still not many women because of that, but the number is growing fast. (A4)

Many people still think it's too violent, that they'll get hurt, you know? But this has been changing. At competitions, we see more and more girls. It's really a question of media, of publicizing it, of saying it, of clarifying what the sport really about is and that it's not that masculine, marginalized thing. (A7).

Boxers' speeches show that many people see boxing as a masculine sport that tends to make its practitioners violent and muscular – characteristics that are socially assigned to men. At the same time, the athletes point out that there have been changes and progress such as the increase in boxing practice among women and the presence of more female athletes at competitions.

When asked about the difference between male and female fights, they answered that there was not much. They underscored that there are differences in strength, speed, believing that men are stronger. Respondents said women care more about the technique used, about making the fight a beautiful spectacle to see, while men think only of putting their opponents down, as can be seen below.

Oh, it's just like a man, only strength is lower, right? They only differ from men in strength and speed. Men are faster. (A1)

The boys are stronger, so the impact is higher. They feel it more, that the punch is really stronger, because we don't have the same punch, but in the end we can take it enough. (A2)

It sure is different. I always say that women are more focused on detail. Women like to do things more perfectly, a perfect blow, something more beautiful. It's also different for the clothes. Some girls adorn themselves more, using skirts, tighter shirts, their bodies, etc. (A4)

The difference is more about strength, that's all. Because, if women had the same strength of men, there wouldn't be any difference. And how about the rules? You have to have a breast shield, which is not legalized today, you use it if you want. That's the only way we'll have prevention. And for men it's the jockstrap. So rules are different. Training is almost the same, because it's four two-minute rounds, and for men it's three rounds of three minutes. That's for Olympic boxing. So training is not very different. (A6)

Today there's not much difference between men's and women's fights. Actually, in some competitions women's fights are more beautiful. Because men have that pride like 'Oh, I have to destroy him, I have to kill him'. Woman do not, they care more about the plasticity of the movement. (A7)

Note, therefore, that athletes' speeches on aspects related to the differences between men and women permeate social constructions of gender related to stereotypes ("male" or "female") as well as behavioral and attitudinal differences (regarding how female and male athletes understand and perform at the sporting spectacle). But at the same time, the athletes indirectly mentioned biological (anatomical and physiological) factors, demonstrating that the perception of gender underlying their speeches encompasses the biological (sex) dimension. In fact, a sex-gender-sexuality-based conception of linearity pervades athletes' accounts, in line with stereotypes and behaviors that are socially expected under the biological classification: sex.

4 ATHLETE'S BOXING HISTORY

Axis 2, comprising Class 3 – "Boxing History" – represents 69.17% of the content of the speeches. This axis shows athletes' perceptions about their histories and those of other athletes in boxing.

Their speeches showed that they had active childhoods and adolescences involved in other sports, especially at school. According to Rosenberg (1995), numerous studies show that school seems to be one of the main spaces for women initiation in Physical Education and sports. However, according to the author, other studies indicate that, directly or indirectly, school produces and reproduces conditions for the permanence of traditional gender roles with regard to the development of boys' and girls' motor potentials.

This study found that most athletes interviewed had had contact with other sports before boxing, and, for some, they were contact sports or martial arts. They entered boxing when they were 16 to 19 years old. Only one athlete began practicing boxing after she was 25. The transition from physical activity to competition took place about three to four months after they started in boxing.

According to Mennesson (2000), female fighters who start boxing after 20 prefer to practice it as a physical activity while those who start earlier choose competitive sport. The accounts below show the interviewees' histories.

I didn't start in boxing. I started in muay thai. Then I began working and I couldn't train muay thai regularly. Since boxing had a schedule that I could do, I started doing boxing. (A2)

I have trained since I was nine, in Olympic Gymnastics. That's when the doctor told me that I could no longer continue in that sport... Then the boxing coach made me a proposal: that I trained boxing at the gym just to keep fit and not gain weight. After less than three months I was in love with boxing and determined to fight. (A3)

It was by chance. I wanted to do it for aesthetic reasons. Then I liked it. And then the gym I went to was focused on high-performance. After three months I went to the Brazilian championship. And I won it, and that motivated me even more. (A4)

Most of these athletes began practicing boxing after invitations by coaches who watched them practicing other activities and offered them the opportunity to try it.

After they started practicing boxing, another recurring point in athletes' speeches was the issue of support by family and friends to continue in the sport. Their speeches show that those who had other professional activities suffered prejudice in their families. The athletes' view on the relationship and the perception of their families and friends about boxing is that, in general, relatives believed that boxing was a marginalized, aggressive, violent and discriminatory sport. Today most families and friends see it differently and attend athletes' fights when they can.

According to Coakley (1994), girls do not usually get the same kind of encouragement to practice sports as boys. Boys are generally encouraged to take a socially independent stance and to be physically active in sports activities and games. Girls are often treated more gently and protectively than boys, they are more closely assisted and when they are allowed to participate in athletics or any other activity, this comes with several restrictions, such as: not doing anything dangerous, not playing with violence, not engaging in altercations or discussions, etc. The following speeches show the relationship of boxers' families with the sport.

My father has never seen me fight. My mother has seen some fights, but she never watches the fight itself. She'll will go and give her support. I think she is afraid, she gets very nervous. (A1)

I remember my first fight. It was my debut, my nose was bleeding. My mother did not know that my nose was bleeding, I hid it from her because I was afraid she wouldn't let me fight. Then she said that if I had told her, she really wouldn't have let me fight. (A2)

At first no one allowed it, also because of man's prejudice. 'You'll become a man, you'll have a man's body', and all that. But now it's really cool, everyone supports me, helps me, likes to watch my fights. (A4)

My mother didn't use to accept it much (laughs). Because sometimes, when I left the gym, I'd come home with my mouth cut, my face scratched, injured, and she's say it was a nutbag's sport, she didn't want me on it. That it was not for me. (A5)

My family does not support boxing at all. They say it's a marginalized sport, that it's very violent, a waste of time because it is not recognized. Nobody watches anything of that. Not even training sessions. It's always been like that. My friends say I'm crazy. (A7)

We believe that there can be distinct motivations for practicing boxing, but permanence in it might depend on the support and respect from several social institutions such as family, groups of friends, the media, etc. Therefore, the demystification of boxing-related prejudices should pervade a collective action in such instances, backed by safety equipment and mechanisms and highlighting the history and technical development of professional boxing.

4.1 Social perception on female boxing

When reporting on the views, perceptions and feelings that other people and women of the same age of the athletes have about them, fear was recurrent in their speeches. There are still prejudiced views about female boxing.

According to Lima (1993), the construction of gender identities is a dynamic process that happens along a life history, through participation in social life according to objective possibilities presented to social subjects. It is indeed in collective experience where each individual collects basic elements guiding his or her self-categorization, perception and experience of socially assigned gender roles.

For Oates (1987), a female boxer surprises, alarms and amuses some people since women's role in that sport has always been marginal. The role of women in boxing has always been limited to being the ring girl or singing the national anthem. The author admits that boxing was designed for men and is related to them, therefore being male. According to Wacquant (2002), the boxing training hall is an eminently masculine space, at which female intrusion is tolerated only to the extent that it remains incidental. The accounts below show respondents' perceptions about their social relationships.

Oh, because I'm a little stronger and I don't talk much to anyone. I keep to myself. But my brother has come to me and told me that people thought I was ugly for the size of my body and all that. (A1)

People around us are afraid... of us. They fear we'll do anything, beat them up. It's funny: people are afraid, friends are afraid. People say (laughs): 'No, I wouldn't mess with you'. (A2)

People are surprised at me. They say: 'You don't box, you don't have a boxer's body, you don't look like a boxer at all. The boys are kind of afraid, they think we are aggressive, we'll fight with them, hit them. (A4)

People who don't know it think you are aggressive, they think it's a man's thing. (A5)

Menesson (2000), when conducting a study with female boxers, found that they had had different behaviors in childhood and adolescence regarding other girls. The author found that the fighters were unruly, liked competition, dressed like boys and preferred their presence to

girls', besides having unusual motor coordination for females. According to the author, most boxers said they identified with male models during childhood, and when they reached adolescence and adulthood, they adapted their behavior to hegemonic standards of femininity. The following speeches show respondents' history of playing during childhood.

I usually say that I should've been born a man because (laughs) I always liked men's games. I've never liked dolls, I've never played house, cooking. I've always liked to play ball, fly a kite, play top, play marbles, hide-and-peek (laughs). (A1)

Since I was a little child, I've always liked to play fighting (laughs). I used to play more with boys. (A5)

I used to like dolls. But there were the games with my brother, there was a room of games, and I always liked to play with them. But my room was full of dolls. (A6)

I liked to play with dolls, but I also played rope, hide and seek, toy cars. There are lots of men in my family, so we'd always play unisex games so I could be in them. (A7)

According to Saravia (2005), culture structures the ways of playing and the objects with which one plays, so that we can say that children's games are structured according to sexes, especially after they are four or five years old. Most times, children do not choose their games; adults impose "what" they play and what they can and should play "with".

4.2 The future in boxing

Regarding questions about athletes' expectations for the future when they can no longer compete, all of them said they would like to remain involved with boxing as coaches, referees, coaching staff members, etc. But they also said that, financially, they will not be able to work only in boxing, since it is still not well known and therefore it does not pay well.

Look, I'll have to remain among this mess. I'll have to do something. I have several options: being a referee, being in the coaching staff. (A1)

I plan to be a boxing coach, always training. But financially, there's no way to fight, make a living out of boxing, not for long. (A2)

I believe I'll be doing clinical work and helping many athletes psychologically, not only boxers, but also in other sports. (A3)

I want to be the coach of the Brazilian team. (A6)

About the existence of more male than female coaches in boxing, they commented that this was due to the absence of a "female culture" in the sport, and they believe that in order to be a coach, a woman should first practice it. The study by Oliveira (2004) seems to confirm that view. By analyzing success stories of sports coaches, the author highlights the importance of checking the factors that influence or hinder access, rise and permanence of women in charge of high-level teams. Thus, her research identified social representations about their histories in charge of those teams in informants' speeches. According to the author, all of them are middle class people surrounded by family structures that gave them conditions to study and practice sports since childhood and they all became coaches after an experience as great athletes. In general, they stated that, to head high-level teams, women have first to experience the sport. Being a former athlete, according to those speeches, is a prerequisite to work in coaching, otherwise there is no respect.

When questioned about why women's boxing was not included in the Olympics until 2012, most replied that the sport still suffers prejudice because, according to the boxers in-

interviewed, many people see boxing as specific for men, violent and dangerous, according to accounts below.

I guess it's for lack of athletes and for the prejudice. (A1)

Well, for a sport to enter the Olympics, a certain number of countries have to practice it. So for martial arts, fights, women are coming now, because taboos are being broken now. Just now women are rising. (A2)

I think it's because of women's high performance. Female boxing has been developing very well. It is showing that it should be there – even if it should've been there a long time, shouldn't it? Also because of the results that we are having – not only us, but also other girls from other countries, other continents. (A4)

I think it's because of a change in view, a change in parameters. They began to view women's boxing as a profitable sport that has potential to grow. (A7)

Today, these girls have matured technically and physically. In the past, girls were not very technical. Now they are more detail-oriented, they are more mature, both physically and technically. (A5)

The athletes reported a change in view on boxing as significant results have been achieved. Their speeches also point to increased participation of women in boxing and technical development of athletes. Brazilian women's boxing results throughout history are not available in sources systematized by the competent body (the Brazilian Boxing Confederation) or in academic production.

The Brazilian Boxing Confederation was founded in 1933 and has undergone successive restructuring processes since then. Athletes and sports officials should organize their agenda, goals and expansion based on that organization. From the data of this study, particularly the speeches discussed in this topic, systematization and support for (male and female) boxers' competitive and post-competitive history seems to be an urgent agenda.

5 FINAL REMARKS

The text discussed issues concerning women's participation in boxing, sex and gender differences, and male dominance in the sports universe. Although this work presents reflections on the reality of a specific group, other interpretations can be based on this study as a starting point for extended discussions over other fighting sports.

The discussion revealed athletes' clear perception that boxing has received little financial incentive. Although all respondents have the so-called "athlete grant", they reported financial difficulties to practice the sport. To broaden the discussion on the topic, future research should consider specific financial investment data for boxing (both those coming from the state actors and private ones). This would allow further discussions on the future of boxing in relation to other professional sports.

Another aspect that has emerged in athletes' speeches was the realization that boxing is still seen by many people as a male, violent and marginalized sport. It was found that, in some families, boxing has become respected and sometimes admired, even though it still remains, for most of them, part of a discriminatory and marginalized context. Therefore, new analyzes should examine the perception of boxing by other social elements such as family members, coaches, sports officials and women's boxing spectators.

The issue of publicizing the sport was also recurrent in speeches. We found that the popularization of boxing depends not only on the media, but on inclusion and legitimation of the content “fights” into body culture as well as on coordinated and continuous actions by the organization representing professional boxing in Brazil, the Brazilian Boxing Confederation to promote, publicize and organize the sport.

As for the fighters’ histories, speeches showed that they had active childhoods and were often involved in games and activities that are socially called “male” and surrounded by discrimination and prejudice. During adolescence, most athletes participated in sports activities in schools and also in other types of fights. This finding indicates the importance and potential of Physical Education to encourage participation of children and youth in activities such as fighting sports. It is known, however, that this content has been neglected in Physical Education, especially at schools. Therefore, it is urgent to produce studies that didactically and methodologically discuss the teaching of fighting sports and gender issues in and out of school, in order to overcome the prejudices that surround them.

Finally, this study reveals the need for understanding boxing as a manifestation of body culture with potential to create opportunities, health benefits, wellbeing, plus a possibility for professional careers for men and women of distinct social classes.

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